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ABSTRACT

Two studies investigated (1) the art preference of young children for realistic, stylized, and abstract styles, and (2) the influence exposure to art had on style preferences. In the first study, 41 preschool children were individually administered an art style preference task comprised of 9 prints, 3 of each style, of well-known paintings. Color and subject matter variables were controlled. A rank ordering of responses indicated a preference for abstract over realistic and stylized paintings. In the second study, 42 preschoolers were administered the preference task both prior to and following exposure to a painting ranked as one of the least preferred in the previous study. The three treatments were classroom exposure, home exposure, or exposure through classroom discussion about the painting/artist. Analyses revealed that all three types of exposure increased preference for the selected painting as well as preference for other paintings in that painting's style. Discussion focuses on the importance of providing opportunities for young children to experience art in relation to the capabilities indicated by the results of the two studies. (Author/RH)

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Influence of Exposure on Preschoolers' Art Preferences

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Abstract

Two studies investigated (1) the art preference of young children for realistic, stylized and abstract styles and (2) the influence exposure to art has on these style preferences. In the first study 41 preschool children (19 females, 22 males) were individually administered an art style preference task comprised of nine prints, three of each style, of well-known paintings. Both color and subject matter variables were controlled. A rank ordering of responses indicated a preference for abstract over realistic and stylized paintings.

Another group of preschoolers (N = 42, 22 females, 20 males) were administered the preference task both prior to and following exposure to a painting ranked as one of the least preferred in the previous study. The three treatments were (1) classroom exposure, (2) home exposure, or (3) exposure through classroom discussion about the painting/artist. Analyses revealed that all three types of exposures increased preference for the selected painting as well as preference for other paintings in that style. The importance of providing opportunities for young children for experiencing art is discussed in relation to capabilities of young children as indicated by the results of the two studies.

Influence of Exposure on Preschoolers' Art Preferences

Attempts to understand how children perceive art have focused on children's responses to various dimensions of art, in particular their preferences for subject matter, color, and style. The findings have not always been in agreement, but they have been most consistent in reporting that children prefer bold colors (Hardiman & Zernich, 1982; Rump & Southgate, 1967) and familiar subject matter that is realistically portrayed (Gaitskell & Hurwitz, 1975; Gardner & Gardner, 1973). Although subject matter has been identified as the most important dimension in determining children's preferences (Taunton, 1980; Hildreth, 1936; Lark-Howitz, 1937), little agreement has been reported for the subjects children like best. Findings from several studies indicate that color in art was the second most influential factor in determining children's art preferences; however, Hardiman and Zernich (1982) found the preferences of children were not affected by the presence or absence of color. Regarding style, preschool children most often prefer representational rather than non-representational pictures (White & Johnson, 1930; Hardiman & Zernich, 1982; Ramsey, 1982). Gardner, Winner, and Kircher (1975) reported an exception to these findings. They found that 4- and 5-year-olds preferred abstract art.

The conflicting findings may be due, in part, to the methodological problems characteristic of preference studies. Typically, the various art dimensions have not been sufficiently

controlled to allow for adequate measurement of preferences. For example, studies investigating subject matter preferences usually did not control for color; studies measuring color preferences did not control for style, and so forth.

Although there have been numerous attempts to gain insights into what children like about art, there have been few efforts to discover how experience shapes attitudes toward it. There is, however, a general perception that parents, teacher, and environment assume important roles in the aesthetic coding process for children. Gardner et al. (1975), using Piaget's clinical methods to identify the stages of cognitive development in the responses of children to art objects, found that 4- and 5-year-old subjects understood little about art and art processes. These researchers speculated that "informed parents and teachers or. . . experience which exposes children to the sources of art work. . ." could readily correct this problem (p. 75).

Efforts to determine how exposure to stimuli influences children's attitudes toward a stimulus were made in the 1960's when researchers investigated the responses of children to familiar and nonfamiliar stimuli of various types (i.e., toys, pictures, shapes, etc.). Consistently the results showed preferences for the nonfamiliar or the novel object (Cantor & Kubose, 1969; Harris, 1965; Mendel, 1965).

Related to these familiarity studies with children, but with contradictory results, was Robert Zajonc's study (1968) in which he reported that attitudes toward the stimuli were enhanced by repeated exposure. The subjects were college students though and the stimuli were words and symbols.

Any conclusions drawn from these studies should be approached with caution. The "familiarization" processes used in the studies never exceeded more than a few minutes and often amounted to only a few seconds; while actual exposure to art typically comes over extended periods of time, as in days, weeks, even months, or through some educational experience. Furthermore, it is not clear that novel characteristics of objects are the same characteristics that sustain interest in an object over time.

How one's appreciation for art develops is not known, but Gaitskell and Hurwitz (1975) suggest that art appreciation includes having knowledge about the aesthetic elements in pictures and that exposure of children to fine art often serves as a stimulus not only to their own creativity, but to increase their awareness of these aesthetic elements. Attempts to gain insight into what and how young children appreciate art have been dependent upon preference studies, the assumption being that preference indicates a certain positive attitude toward the stimulus. This positive attitude may be the only tangible measure of the appreciation young children have for a work of art.

The purpose of the first study was to identify preferences of preschoolers for realistic, stylized and abstract art while controlling for color, subject matter, and style of painting. To investigate more carefully the question of whether exposure influences children's art preferences, a second study tested three different, but typical methods of exposing children to art.

Study 1

Method

In the first study, 8 faculty and graduate students in art or art related programs classified 25 prints of paintings by well-known artists according to style using Evan's (1973, p. 85 definitions for stylized, realistic, and abstract art. In this framework, stylized art "consists of simplifying the visual aspect of an object by eliminating all unnecessary details and exaggerating lines to produce dramatic forms and pronounced rhythms. The reduction of detail and purposeful distortion places emphasis upon the essence of form." The realistic style is represented in designs "that duplicate the familiar aspects of nature" whereas abstract "forms are so organized that the identity of an object may be lost, or ambivalent images may appear through the lack of sufficient number of identifying cues. Moreover, abstract design does not rely solely upon objects for its content but includes ideas, emotions, and qualities." On the basis of the panels' classifications, three prints that most clearly represented

each of the three styles were selected. The specific paintings and style classification are shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

The stylized and realistic paintings were of floral arrangements whereas the abstract paintings were non-representation. None of the paintings were named for the preschool subjects in an effort to further control for subject matter. The effect of color was controlled by presentation of black and white as well as color reproductions of the nine paintings.

The nine 4" x 6" reproductions were organized into three sets, each set containing one stylized, abstract, and realistic painting. For the art style preference task, the black and white grouping of three sets was shown twice, followed by one showing of the colored set. The order of the second showing (Group 2) of the black and white was changed to control for an order effect. The colored prints were shown last (Group 3) and in the same order as the first black/white grouping.

The art style preference task was individually administered to 41 preschoolers (19 girls and 22 males) ranging in age from 37 to 67 months. The children were asked to select the picture they liked best and to tell why they chose that painting.

To obtain an overall preference score, realistic selections were arbitrary given a score of 1, stylized selections a score of 2, and abstract selections a score of 3. This scoring system was based on the assumption that the scores represented increasing levels of abstraction. A score for each of the two black and white groupings and the color grouping was obtained by adding the scores across the three sets. Scores from all three groups (9 sets) were added together for a total score.

The nine paintings were rank ordered on the basis of the frequency of selections for the black and white groupings combined, the color grouping, and for all three groupings as shown in Table 1.

Results and Discussion

The intercorrelations between the scores for the two black and white groupings and the color grouping were calculated. Results revealed that the black/white grouping (1) was not significantly related, $r = .15$, to the black/white grouping (2) but was related to the color grouping (3), $r = .40$, $p < .01$. The color grouping (3) was not related to the black/white grouping (2), $r = .28$, $p < .07$. The failure to find a correlation between the two black/white groupings indicates the children were not making selections on the basis of style. Examination of the percentage of children choosing each selection indicated that selections were not based on order.

On the other hand, the significant correlation between groupings (1) and (3) with order and comparisons held constant across the groupings indicated that the choices were not influenced by color and that the choices reflecting style preference were relatively stable from one grouping to another. Rankings based on frequency data across all the groupings indicate a preference for abstract over realistic and reaslistic over stylized paintings.

It is not clear from these findings if children's selections reflected idiocycratic choices or if they were based, at least in part, on style. Thus, a second study was conducted to clarify and extend the findings.

Study 2

Method

Forty-two subjects (22 girls and 20 boys) ranging in age from 40 to 67 months participated in the second study. Children were exposed to a 11" x 14" framed color print of the painting, "Pot of Geraniums," by Henri Matisse in one of the following ways: (a) exposure by hanging the print in the child's classroom for six weeks, (b) exposure by handing the print in the child's bedroom for six weeks, or (c) exposure through classroom discussion about the painting and the artist by an art teacher. Parents and teachers of the children in the classroom and home exposure groups were given information about the painting and the artist for reference if the children asked questions concerning the painting. All of the 16

children in each of three classrooms were originally included in the study. However, due to prolonged absences and illness, some children were dropped from the study. Complete data was available for 15 children with classroom exposure, 13 children with home exposure, and 14 subjects in the classroom discussion group.

The Matisse painting ranked 8 out of 9 in the first study, indicating it was one of the least preferred paintings. The painting was also one from the stylized group, the style least preferred by the subjects. In addition, selection of "Pot of Geraniums" was based on availability of multiple copies.

Prior to and following exposure to the Matisse painting, the children were individually administered the art style preference task. The administration procedure was identical to that described for the first study except that the second black and white grouping was reorganized such that it had a different order but the same comparisons as the black and white grouping (1). The total number of realistic choices, total number of stylized choices and total number of abstract choices were totaled for each grouping. For correlation analyses, scores were calculated in the same manner as described in study 1 (e.g., 1 for realistic). Rankings were also calculated in the same manner described in Study 1.

Three separate, simple analyses of variance revealed that the treatment groups did not differ significantly from one another on

any of the three pre-test style preference scores, indicating the groups could be considered equal prior to the exposure treatments.

In view of the differences in age composition of the classroom, *t*-test comparisons of older and younger subjects (based on a median split) for each of the style preference pre-test scores were calculated. The results indicated that the scores were not a function of age. Similar analyses also indicated sex was not a factor. Thus, both age and sex were not considered in any further analyses.

Results

Pre- and post-treatment scores for the total sample were compared using a paired comparison *t*-test procedure. The findings revealed that the pre/post comparison for abstract was non-significant. The comparison for realistic, $t\ (1,41) = -2.79$, $p < .0079$ and stylistic, $t\ (1,41) = 2.34$, $p < .0240$ were significant, indicating that the number of realistic choices decreased significantly from pre- to post-test whereas the stylistic choices increased significantly. In regard to the pre/post comparison for stylistic scores by treatment the three groups did not differ significantly from one another suggesting that while exposure to a stylistic painting increased the number of stylized painting selected, one treatment was not preferrable to another in bringing about that increase.

Correlational analysis revealed that style preference scores were relatively stable from one grouping to another in each testing. That is, children who scored high for example on the first grouping of black/white prints tended to score similarly on the second grouping of black/white prints, as well as on the colored prints grouping. Correlations for the pre-test were $r = .41$, $p < .006$ between groups one and two; $r = .59$, $p < .0001$ between groupings 1 and 3; and $r = .51$, $p < .0005$ between groupings 2 and 3. Similar correlations found for the post-test scores were $r = .45$, $p < .003$ between groupings 1 and 2; $r = .57$, $p < .004$ between groupings 1 and 3, and $r = .55$, $p < .002$ between groupings 2 and 3.

As Table 1 shows the pre-test data replicate the finding in the first study which showed that preschool age children prefer abstract and realistic to stylized paintings.

Summary

Contrary to the results reported in the literature (e.g., Bradbury, 1975) which indicate preschool children's preferences tend to be inconsistent, the children in these two studies were relatively consistent in their preferences. These findings, coupled with the finding that two different samples of preschoolers preferred paintings in the abstract and realistic styles to the stylized style, suggest that young children do have preferences in art and that these preferences can be measured.

Findings from a number of earlier studies (see review by Taunton, 1982) indicate that subject matter is the most salient variable in determining young children's art preference with color a close second. In the studies reported here, the subject matter of the selections was held constant (i.e., all of the realistic and stylized paintings were floral arrangements). In both studies, the stylized paintings consistently ranked the lowest, regardless of black and white or color presentation. It would appear that the children were responding, at least in part, to style rather than subject matter or color. Yet, examination of the reasons given by the children for their choices revealed subject matter and color to be the most frequently given responses. It seems possible that the children may have lacked the ability to verbalize a reason related to style. To further explore this notion, an investigation is currently underway to assess preschool children's ability to sort paintings by style when subject matter and color are controlled.

Consistent with the findings of Gardner, Winner & Kircher (1975), children in these two investigations tended to prefer abstract art. In giving reasons for selecting the abstract paintings, the children elaborated in great detail on a wide variety of subjects they saw in the paintings. Thus, it appears that the greater appeal of abstract art may have been due to its potential to accommodate a greater number of interpretations.

Findings from the second study support the notion that the capabilities of young children for experiencing art have been underestimated. The three methods of exposure significantly increased the children's preference not only for the Matisse painting but for other paintings similar in style.

Annecdotal information obtained from the parents of the children in home exposure group provide valuable insights into the experience. A number of these parents reported "ownership" of the painting as an important factor in the child's interest in the painting. Further, children from this group gave ownership of the painting as their reason for selecting it as their favorite. A few children in the other two groups mentioned remembering having seen the painting indicating familiarity is also a factor influencing preferences. These comments point out the importance of involving children in the selection of art work displayed in their classroom and homes. Parents and teachers can control "quality" by offering children an opportunity to choose a painting from several high quality selections.

Although parallels can be drawn between exposure to art and exposure to literature (books/readings) aesthetic education for young children is often overlooked. A wide variety of paintings are available through public libraries. Classroom teachers could introduce a group of paintings by a particular artist to the children, allowing them to choose the one they would like to hang

in their classroom. Through this process the children could be exposed to a wide variety of art. Inexpensive reproductions of paintings are available from museums. These reproductions could be given to the children to accommodate the interest in "ownership" of paintings. These are just a couple of possibilities for fostering aesthetic appreciation in young children in age appropriate ways.

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